

ENCOUNTER IN ITALY

Jean looked nervously around the airport. She had never seen such a large hall! It was worse than Victoria station. And so many people, all busy and looking as if they knew exactly what they were doing. Oh, if only Diana hadn't persuaded her to come on this stupid holiday. Jean sat down on a convenient bench. She felt like crying.

The year was 1955. Diana and Jean had been saving for months out of their salaries as teachers in order to go on a tour of northern Italy. For both of them it was to be the first time they had flown - the first time even that they had been abroad - and for months they had spent all of their spare time reading travel books about cities with romantic names that even Shakespeare had written about: Venice, Verona, Padua, Milan....

The week of their departure had finally come. They could hardly contain their excitement. But then disaster: Diana's elderly father suffered a severe heart attack. Although he was not in danger, he lived alone, and Diana felt she should really stay behind and look after him. Their tour company would refund her holiday fee, but since he was not related to Jean, they refused to refund hers. So Diana insisted that Jean went on alone.

And now Jean wished that she hadn't. She felt so lost, so small, so alone, in that busy airport. A small, rather funny-looking little man walked past, smiling. He had a nice smile, although he was not particularly handsome. He raised his hat to her in an old-fashioned way. She

wondered if perhaps he were Austrian, or Swiss, where people are still courteous.

"Oh *do* come on!" she said to herself. "Pull yourself together. Whatever would Diana say?" But the memory of Diana only reminded her how alone she was, and she began to cry.

"Goodness me! Whatever's the matter?" A neat, trim lady, some ten years older than her, was standing in front of Jean. She was dressed with some panache and looked like a very experienced traveller. If she had not spoken with such a beautiful, clipped English accent, Jean would definitely have thought she were Parisian. She produced, seemingly from nowhere, a small hankie with an edelweiss embroidered in the corner, and while she wiped away the tears Jean explained how she came to be in the airport alone.

"Well, we just can't have you all on your own now, can we?" said the traveller, whose name turned out to be Mary. "I'm going on the same tour as you. You'll just have to join up with me and my friend Beryl. We'll have a jolly old time together, just you see."

So while Mary went off to find Beryl, Jean checked her baggage in and passed through into the departures lounge. In no time at all she was in a crowd of strangers walking across the tarmac to what looked like a very large plane. Mary was well ahead of her, talking continuously to a rather large lady whom she assumed must be Beryl. The funny little man was right behind them. The jacket of his light brown suit was slung over his

arm, and the hat was pushed back in a very jaunty manner. Perhaps he wasn't Swiss after all. Not nearly formal enough.

As the plane took off, Jean completely forgot her loneliness: there was so much to see! In moments they were flying over the channel, with lots of tiny matchstick boats leaving white trails behind them, and then houses and fields to look at. The pilot said they could see Paris, but it was really a grey mass in the distance. She thought she could see the Eiffel Tower, but was too shy to ask the man sitting next to her. Then came some huge fluffy white clouds - what a funny experience to fly through a cloud, it was just like fog! - and then the Alps, covered with snow glistening in the sunshine, and in no time at all they were coming down to land.

Jean was finally in Italy! It was all very strange, but also exciting. The airport officials didn't speak English, except for "Pliz" and "Tank you", but looked very smart in their uniforms, and seemed to enjoy saluting. Being young, pretty, and on her own, Jean received a lot of attention. She was, after all enjoying herself. Perhaps Diana was right after all!

The representative of the tour company was there to meet everyone, and shepherded them all into two rather tatty coaches (her mother would have called them charabancs!) which whizzed them through the traffic - all on the wrong side of the road - to a very grand hotel. Mary and Beryl were on the other coach. The funny little man was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was Italian, and had gone home to his family. Even though she didn't know him, Jean missed him. He was somebody familiar in a very unfamiliar world.

Later that night, Jean came downstairs for dinner. The dining room was enormous, full of glamorously-dressed people all talking loudly. She looked around timidly for a familiar face, and noticed Mary coming over to her. "Come along," said Mary, "I've had them sit you with me for the rest of the tour. You're one of us now." She took Jean by the arm in a very cosy manner, as if for years they had been the best of friends, and led her over to a table where Beryl was already settled with a cigarette and a glass of wine. Mary introduced them and Jean sat down next to her.

"Oh, and this is my brother, Pete," added Mary, almost as an afterthought, and waved her hand casually towards the man who had come up behind Jean. She looked round and saw none other than the funny little man, who smiled shyly and sat down. It was almost like being reunited with an old friend. Jean felt she knew him already.

And so the tour of Italy began. Pete, quite overshadowed by his voluble sister, was glad to have somebody more timid to accompany him, and often sat next to Jean on the coach, while Mary talked incessantly to Beryl behind them. Jean was glad of his company. At least she was no longer alone and, like Pete, she found Mary kind, though rather overpowering. They often sneaked off for a coffee together while they should have been looking round an art gallery. When they got back, Mary always chastised them for not telling her where they were going. "Oh, I should have *loved* to do that!" she would invariably sigh.

Pete was a very gentle man, kind and thoughtful, never pushing himself forward. Jean liked that. He was so different to all the other men she knew, who were always vying for her attention and trying hard to impress her. Pete never did that; he simply was who he was, and that said enough. By the end of the holiday she was in love with him, and he with her. They kept in touch once they got home, and married the following year.

On the table in front of me as I write is a photo taken on that holiday. With an anonymous piazza as a backdrop, Mary is centre stage, smiling like a movie star and holding Beryl tightly by the arm. Off to the other side of the picture stands Jean, slightly apart, in the group but not really a part of it, and to the rear stands Pete, part-way between Mary and Jean, but leaning slightly towards his future wife. Why do I have the picture on my desk? It's the earliest photo I have of my parents together!